                                    Childhood Experiences

     I grew up in a poor family in South Vietnam.  When I was eight years

old, I learned  how to take care of a baby.  He was my younger brother.

I took care of him since he was three days old, when he came home

from the hospital.  In my culture, when a woman has a baby, she must

stay home in a warm bed for 30 days.  My  mom stayed in bed when

she got home from the hospital.  My new baby brother was in the middle

of the bed, and I was next to him on the other side.  At night, I had to get

up about three times to mix the milk powder with the warm water in the

bottle to feed my brother.  I changed his diapers and held him in my arms

whenever he cried.  When he was sick, I went to the hospital to stay with

him all night.  I took care of him until he was a year old.  I loved him so

much - I felt like he was my own baby.  One day when he was a year old,

I woke up in the bed, but he was gone.

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                          A Day That Frightened Me

     It was about  4 p.m.  I was giving my two younger brothers a bath at

the well.  Suddenly, I heard gun noise, and the ground shook.  Then fire

and smoke were everywhere.  Quickly, I pushed my brothers on the

ground and laid over them to protect them.  After a few minutes, we got up

and saw people running to the rice field yelling to each other.  Some of

them were carrying baskets on their shoulders with a long stick and some

carried things on their heads.  I saw a man carrying a baby in front of his

chest.  When he ran past us, he yelled out loud,  “What are you looking

at?”  “Follow us, you can’t stay here.”  I didn’t know what to do but I

wrapped the bath towel and put it on my shoulder and held my brothers

with both hands trying to run home.  We couldn’t see the way home

because of the  wave of people.  They ran fast and some of them fell on

the ground.  The others behind ran or stepped over them.  Between the

gun fire and the people it created a terrible picture.  I held my brothers

tightly with my hands and we kept running and following the people.

After about 45 minutes of running like that I saw the man again.  He ran

next to us, and then he fell on the ground lying on the baby.  His back

was covered with blood.  I found out later he died, but the baby survived.

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                                The Day I Was Lost

     After running and following or being pushed by the wave of people,

I realized that we were far away from our village.  My 4 and 5 year old

brothers were hungry.  They started to cry and asked me where we were

going and why?  Where is mom they said.   They gave me a hard time,

and I couldn’t answer because at that time I was only 10 years old.  I

didn’t even know what happened and why people ran away from the

village, and I didn’t know where my mom was.  All I knew was to hold

tight to my brothers to make sure that I didn’t lose them between the  peo-

ple.  As we followed the people we got farther from our village.  We kept

walking over rice fields.  Smoke was all over the sky.  The sun was gone

and people stopped running.  They spread out on the ground and found

their own places to sit.  I looked around but couldn’t find any spot for us

to rest.  One of the ladies asked us if we wanted to share a place with

her.  I said thank you and walked my brothers over.  The lady asked me

where was my mom and I said I didn’t know.  My brothers and I were

so hungry and tired we all lay on each other and fell asleep.  The next

morning, another group of people came.  Some of them found their

families.  We found our mom.

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                                    My First Job

     I came from a poor family with ten siblings.   I learned to help my mom

when I was 8 years old.  My dad was a soldier and his salary just enough

to buy a ton of rice.  We didn’t have enough food to eat sometimes.  My

mom had to make cakes for us to sell to earn extra money.  My older

brother and I took turns to sell the cakes after school.  Every afternoon

my mom gave each of us twenty banana sticky cakes to sell and an extra

three cakes for us.  We could eat or sell the three extra cakes and if we

sold them, that money belonged to us.  At the beginning, I was very

excited about my first job.  I started counting the cakes that my mom gave

to me.  After counting them, I put them in the basket and carried it on my

head.  As I walked out of the house, I shouted out loud “banana sticky

rice.”   I was successful on my first day.  I sold them all in four hours by

stopping at every neighbor’s house and asking them to buy the cakes.

The cakes were hot and delicious wrapped in banana leaves that made

them smell good and taste yummy.

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                                     Another Childhood Experience

     It was a day that I have never forgotten.  Like every day, I carried my

cake basket to the bus station.  As I sat down on one of the corners in

front of stores, my eyes looked around to see people passing by.

Suddenly, I saw the body of a girl lying on the ground on the  corner.

Her face was covered with flies and her mouth was filled with worms

crawling back and forth.  I thought she was dead.  I was shaking and

almost threw up when I saw that.  About fifteen minutes later her body

started moving - she was alive.  She was sleeping and she woke up.

That moment made me think, and be thankful that I’m only a poor kid

but I’m not homeless and I still have a better life than that girl.  That girl

lost her family and she llved on the street.  During the day time she

begged for money and at night she slept in front of the stores by the bus

station.  She didn’t brush her teeth or clean her mouth, so that was why

all the flies lay on her mouth and lips while she was sleeping.

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      We were very poor so my mom had to make cakes to sell and we

siblings had to take turns to help my mom.  We went to collect left over

rice in the army camp or sell ice tea at the bus station.  The first time I

collected rice I went with my older brother.  After school I went with my

brother to the army camp to get the left over rice.  It took us about two

hours to get there in the afternoon under the high heat of the sun.  My

brother and I walked barefoot on the  street and sometimes on the hot

sand.  Our feet got burned.  We stopped under a tree to give our feet a

break.  While we were resting, my brother came up with an idea.  He took

a banana leaf  that was wrapped under the food to walk on  but it was

very hard to walk.   When we finally got there I waited for my brother out-

side and he walked in to collect the left over rice.  After were done we

had to walk back home.  Life was not easy for us at that time.

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     Some children  don’t want to go to school.  They cry, appear fearful,

or just outright refuse to come to school.  Some of them dream of a

million things they could do if they were not at school, even though they

have opportunities for a good education.  I had but one dream, and that

was to go to school to learn how to read, write, and to count.  To be able

to go to school and follow my dream to improve my knowledge is very

important to me.

     School wasn’t easy for poor children in my country, Vietnam.  I loved

school but didn’t have a chance to go when I was 9 like other kids.  My

family was very poor, and I grew up with ten siblings in a small village;

there was only one school.  In order to go to school, I must have a

uniform and pay for school supplies.  At the beginning of the school

year, my parents were able to buy for me two textbooks, one for

studying and the other for writing, and a pencil.  My uniform was from

my older sister that she wore from the year before.  Before school, I

helped my mom to sell cakes and iced tea at the bus station.  After

school, I had to do the housework: hand wash the clothes for the entire

family, get the water from the well, carry it home for daily use, and wash

the dishes.  I got up at five in the morningto do my homework under the

tiny lantern.  School was my joy - I could learn, meet new friends, have

fun, and be able to be a kid like others.  My school went smoothly until

the middle of the school year.  I used up the writing book, but my parents

couldn’t afford to buy a new one.  Every day I asked or begged each of

my classmates for a piece of paper.   I smashed rice to make glue to

paste the papers behind the old book.  I also created my own ink to

write with from the purple spinach fruit (trai mong toi).  One day my

uniform got attention from my teacher, because its white color had

changed to beige from lack of soap to wash it.  She also found out my

writing book was unacceptable.  On that day, I reallized I was getting

in trouble because of my poverty, and I saw the importance my school

placed on appearance, uniform, and school supplies.  The school sent

me home because of that; I stopped going to school and stayed at home

after that time.

     I came  to America at age 17.  School is still my dream, and I have

always wanted to go to school to learn English and improve my

knowledge.  On the other hand, I need to work to earn a living and to

help my parents back home.  I ended up choosing work over school.

     Now I work for myself near the College of Marin.  I am able to manage

my time at work to take some English classes in writing, reading, and

speaking.  In order to go to school I must give up my free time and my

tennis.  I get up early to go to school and stay up late to do homework.

I walk to school from work; after school I walk back to work, and always

feel rushed to fit everything into my schedule.  However, I enjoy  my time

at school.  I have learned more and improved my knowledge.  I  have

gained more confidence when talking with people and feel happier.

Another good feeling is that when I walk to school I enjoy nature.  I

look at the sky, feel the fresh air, and listen to the birds sing along the

road.  Seeing myself with other students on the campus reminds me of

the old days when I was a kid.

     Being in school is a challenge; to be able to go to school I have to

work hard.  However, I have a passion for school and that is my

happiness.  It gives me an amazing feeling that I can be like a kid again.

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